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ABSTRACT

This speech discusses ways of using school resources more efficiently, premised on the understanding that putting more money into a system does not necessarily make that system better. The author suggests the creation of a search-and-plan group of selected educational, community, and student personnel that would share ideas with other districts, study priority lists, identify the needs to bemet, and indicate ways of meeting them. The paper also suggests that a school-community workshop be organized wherein teachers would study their community to analyze a particular local resource within the framework of its contribution to educational relevance. (JF)

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National School Board Association
Philadelphia, Pa.

April 5, 1971

Suburban-Urban Educational Resources

by Benjamin C. Willis

I am most happy to be here today - to bring you greetings from sunny Florida, and to let you see one man who has not had time to get out in it. Most of my friends seem to find the time though - at least they have been able to acquire a healthy tan by riding with the top down, or sitting under a sun lamp while they read the Wall Street Journal. One very close friend has a beautiful tan. He has taken up gardening since he retired, but he had a hard time getting things to grow properly, so he decided to send a sample of the soil to the U. S. Department of Agriculture to have it analyzed. He did, and they did. The report: "Dear Sir: This soil needs everything but sand."

It is safe to say that one of Florida's resources is sand, which brings me to my concern here today of resources to support our public schools.

If it comes as a surprise to you that education is fast pricing itself out of its own market, you should be up here and I should be listening to you. True the cost of everything is increasing. As a consequence, the consumer is becoming more conscious of the value received for each expenditure. As a consumer myself, I have the same concerns. As a superintendent of schools I do not believe that any educational system will be improved by merely pouring more money into the system. In particular, I would like to explore some alternatives to consolidating school districts merely for the purpose of obtaining a favorable tax basis, which obviously puts more money in the system. I just do not believe that more and more money makes the system better and better. There is certainly a point in an expenditure-value consideration when the marginal return begins to decrease - when the next dollar you spend buys

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you less than the preceding dollar. I have no intention in these few minutes of becoming entangled in a marginal education dollar discussion - but I do intend to assume that we in education are very near that point now, that every dollar we spend in education today is very near the point of buying us less education than a dollar did yesterday. There are those who would say ... "And what else is new?" - insinuating that that point has long since passed - nor would I here take any time to refute his contention, because we both would be looking for ways to increase the marginal rate of return on our educational dollar - to buy more for our dollar.

My second assumption is that you and the professionals in your school district have the capability of recognizing an educational program which would best meet your needs. What I am really assuming here is that there is no common denominator for improving the educational program in the nearly 23,000 school districts in our nation. In this assumption there is also implied that uniformity is not desirable.

I would also make one final assumption and that is: Involvement in the search and planning for improved educational programs by selected educational, community, and student personnel is a prime condition for success. Nor do I intend here to prescribe the administrative details of the operation of this search-and-plan group, but I will make the observation that you do not have to raise taxes to support such a group.

To begin with there are many parables which support my first concern. One is: "Any road will get you there if you do not know where you are going." A second is, "Do not pack your bags until you know where you are going."

Your first concern then should be what do we want to improve in the system. Note "we" - your publics are plural.

In answering this there is a tendency for the areas of improvement to be so global that it is impossible to establish any valid criteria for success. To frequently, for example, we want to improve the curriculum. Certainly, no one can quarrel with wanting to improve the curriculum, but how do you know when you have been successful? I would recommend that you list, in exhaustive detail, the entire educational program for your system. Arrange them in a priority of concern, and begin a search and plan mission with your S and P group.

Before this particular mission begins, though, may I suggest that you not fall victim to blaming someone else for the problems in the system. I was visiting a beginning industrial arts class early this year, when one of the youngsters came up to the instructor and said, "Mr. Jones, this saw doesn't cut straight." I wonder if another saw would cut straighter. It might, but I have a suspicion that it won't. Again a parable, "Get your own house in order before you examine your neighbors."

My long time friend and fellow educator, Dr. Ben Brodinski, at a recent regional meeting in Atlanta of School Systems Public Relations personnel pointed out that "The Image of Public Education Can be Improved by Improving the School Board Meetings." He suggested that the considerations of a School Board at their meetings fall into three categories, (1) Business and/or Legal, (2) Policy Making, and (3) Community Forums. So before your search and plan group gets too far from home, make sure that your part of the improvement plan for the district includes a self study.

With the BIG HOUSE in order, the S & P group can begin its anaylsis of the priority list of present educational programs in the district. The purpose of this analysis would be to determine what a particular program is doing, what it is not doing, and where it is being done better. You will not have to go far to find a comparable school, or district, which you feel is doing the job better. Arrange with that district to study their program.

Theme One, in my tax evasion plan for improving an educational program, is to develop a cooperative effort for idea sharing with districts in your vicinity. I propose idea sharing, not tax sharing. Beware of numerical psychosis, however. Beware of assuming that more of anything will improve the problem or program.

This particular psychosis reminds me of a system study of the elevator capacity in a tall office building. The complaint was that the people on the top floors had to wait too long to get an elevator. The obvious answer was one more elevator at a cost of thousands of dollars. One analyst in the group actually spent time on each floor, by each elevator, recording the waiting time and comments made. He concluded that really the waiting time was not excessive - it just seemed excessive. Now the problem was how to make the time pass faster. His solution was to put wide full-length mirrors on each side of the elevator entrance and the vanity of men and women, alike, made the time pass faster, and besides, you could sneak a good long peek at others waiting.

The whole point of relating the story is that it pays to approach the solution of a problem from the least expensive side. Moreover in our case, yours and mine, it is most prudent to move slowly, to move into tomorrow as inexpensively as we can.

Thus, the S & P group as it studies the priority list, as it identifies the needs to be met and the ways and means of meeting those needs, should be searching

for ideas, searching for demonstration of methods and techniques which are operational - not in some far off, non-comparable school system, but rather in one close at hand.

The real essence of idea sharing is that for too long we have thought that all great things in education are happening 1,000 miles away. But as I talk to the educators across this land I find things are happening in every school district and if we share the good things we will find that it is really more ideas we are looking for, not just more money.

I realize that in some cases more money will be needed, but put the money need in its proper place, after the S & P group has visited the neighbors.

Included in the planning for meeting the needs should be a survey of community resources. This is my second theme: Use the community as a laboratory. This concept has been also proposed by the National Association of Manufacturers in suggesting that community resource workshops be held to explore making education relevant for the '70's.

In its broadest sense, community resource applies to anything in the community that has educational value - museums, theaters, city hall, libraries, businesses, manufacturing firms, parks, and an endless variety of other resources suited to student needs.

If we are to use the community as a laboratory, the most appropriate way to discover what is out there is as the NAM suggests, a community-school workshop. The planning for the workshop is strictly a local affair. An advisory committee, including selected members of the S & P group, should be formed with business leaders, civic leaders, and community groups. In some cases it may be appropriate to include representatives from a college or university.

Frequently, the core group of this committee is an existing organization or education committee of a business and industry-related organization.

The purpose of this workshop is two fold: (1) resource analysis, and (2) resource use. Teachers study their community in order to analyze a particular resource and its contribution in making portions of the educational program more relevant - in taking the instructional unit out of the textbook, and into the community as a laboratory.

The idea, of course, is not new. It is as old as the traditional apprentice training programs which used the real thing as an instructional tool. What is important here is the revived term of relevance associated with the search for ideas in our own back yard, or own community.

Teachers visit industries and all kinds of business concerns such as banks, stores, factories, farms, bakeries, TV stations, governmental and cultural centers.

The results of the workshop are not only a production of teaching materials for use in the classroom, but also a wealth of real world situations upon which the teacher can draw to plan community laboratory experiences both in class and in the community laboratory.

Another output of this school-community cooperative effort could be a catalog of community resources including a list of people and places with special skills, knowledge, materials, and equipment.

Participants can work on units in transportation, American Industry, special incentive units in science, social studies, arithmetic or economics; career opportunities for high school graduates with a better understanding of the concept of the world of work.

Using the community as a laboratory is a two-way concept. The community, through more direct involvement with the school programs gains a better understanding of the process of education, while the school itself improves its program by utilizing the real world - by making textbook pictures three dimensional and working.

Throughout all that I have said here today, I have tried to emphasize that the resource that we have been overlooking is the human resource - the mind of man - the ideas for improving your instructional program which exists in your neighborhood and community. Find the way through S & P groups, through School, Community workshop activities, and through cooperative efforts with adjoining school districts, to encourage and excite your own people into searching for ideas, and sharing them with others.

I would, at this point, call your attention to the common denominator of all ongoing institutions which I have every reason to believe includes education - though I hear dire predictions to the contrary. The common denominator is change. Searching for ideas implies looking for better things, and the better things will replace those things not as good. An effective S & P group will provide your system with exercises in change, and the community laboratory will reinforce the improvement.

So today I would propose a search for ideas, not money.

I would propose cooperation, not consolidation

I would propose unity, but not uniformity

I would propose involvement, not isolation and, finally, I would propose that the entire community be your classroom.

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